

Smartphone addiction or why our children aren't talking to us

By Joseph Erban

When we look to our historic past we might reflect and ask: how did we get to the point where our children spend more time in front of some screen media rather than talking to us directly?

As hunters and gathers we used to spend a great deal of time together hunting, gathering fruits and nuts or playing, much like other contemporary primates do today.

The 18th century Industrial Revolution enable humans to industrially mass produce items which were desirable, such as clothes, homes, electricity, running safe water, toilets, faster modes of transportation, newspapers, radio and eventually television. Once those have become common, which most in the developed world possessed, industry required to either increase their market share or introduce new products in order to increase profits, industry's primary goal.

Through mass advertisement including ads in newspapers, radio and later TV were found massively effective in influencing people behaviour and increased consumers' purchases.

Once industry mastered the ability to influence people's habit of consuming products that are marketed as desirable, it's only a stone throw away to becoming a consumer addict.

So what are the features of a consumer addiction? Like substance addiction, it entails a compulsion. The person needs to buy something and that is triggered by the feel good experience in anticipation of the purchase. But perhaps just as important is the need for the consumer addict to regulate negative emotions.

Let me illustrate this with an example. Terry receives a message on her smartphone that there is a sale on a pair of summer shoes she has been eyeing out all summer and the sale is just next door. How convenient?

She is feeling a bit anxious because her new contact whom she meet on a dating site has not return her request to get together for coffee. Feeling somewhat anxious and sad, the thought of buying that gorgeous pair of shoes makes her feel happier and without too much thinking caused her to literally run to the store to buy that pair, even though she didn't really need a new pair just yet. Nevertheless, the thought of buying them made her feel good and gave her momentary relieve from her anxiety and sadness of not having receive a reply form her desired would be date, that caused her to run and buy her shoes.

That is how marketing works. It creates products that make us feel good, so good that we want to continuously consume it. At the same time when we experience a negative emotion, like depression, anxiety or fear, these act as triggers to use some of industry's products which are so *designed* in order to make us feel better.

In doing so, industry creates products that make us feel good in the short term, but in the long term can cause a great deal of harm to either the person or people around that person. Any ongoing regular behaviour which causes harm to the person or her relationships due to compulsive behaviour triggered by either the need to feel good or to relieve negative emotions, can thus be considered as an addiction. In the case of Terry, the resulting harm comes from her enormous debt due to her impulsive shopping either to feel good or relieve of her anxiety or depression due to her use of her dating app.

I just have to mention a few addictions that were and are created and mass produced by industry: processed food, tobacco, alcohol, vaping, gambling, TV watching, Internet surfing, mobile and smartphone addiction, gaming, Facebook, Twitter, etc.

In fact when you come to think of it there are numerous products and services that could eventually become addictive by design. So you may ask, how come some products or services are addictive while others are not?

And this is where industry has the means of producing highly addictive products and services because it is in their primary interest to do so. In an effort to maximized profit industry continuously improves its products, using the latest science and technology, in order to sell more. But because industry's

requirement of maximizing profit, and because we are currently living in an Artificial Intelligence economy, industry creates addictive products and these have certain characteristics.

Take the case of tobacco addiction. When you look at its history, it began with first nations using tobacco in a pipe. Cigarettes in the 19th century were hand rolled and tobacco was not nearly as addictive as they are today. In an effort to get young people hooked on their products more effectively, the tobacco industry, over the course of the past 100 years has manipulated the production of cigarettes and is now a major producer of heat not burn vaporizers. All in an effort to increase profit, but in doing so is increasing the spread of nicotine addiction worldwide.

Of course not all who do use these products go on to become addicts, but many do !

As is this case with cigarettes, the increased in nicotine addiction is industry manufactured. The same can be said of smartphone addiction, gaming addiction, shopping addiction, and so on.

When we compare with our hunter-gatherer ancestors who required basic needs, such a security, social companionship and food, industry is required to produce products which we do not biological or psychological actually need. After all, we were able to attain those needs prior to the advent of smartphone technology, but seeing others with new products and ads for such products, coupled with fear of missing out (FOMO) often causes us to imitate others' behaviour and buy the latest gadget.

And what better way to maximize consumers' purchases and profit than to produce addictive products and services.

So from the beginning of mass producing industry, the leading addictive products were tobacco, alcohol, drugs and gambling. All are pleasure or feel good causing products or services.

The advent of the internet, portable computers, tablets and smartphones simply rendered screen media, including television portable. Instead of sitting in front

of a large computer or a TV set in your home, you can now carry your smartphone with you always, which not only serves the same purpose as the original TV and computers did, but by influencing the viewer through ads and propaganda, but can now do much, much more.

In the process of industry's introduction of the various screen media currently available, it enables much greater potential for behavioural influence and manipulation including the creation of increased addictions through production and marketing of products and services that are pleasurable or make us feel good, but can cause harm when used in excess.

Whereas TV influenced our consumption through advertisement and political commentaries, various screen media continues to do the same, but much more effectively, because of what Shoshana Zuboff refers to as surveillance capitalism.

Ads are now specifically targeting you using knowledge about your likes, desires and emotional vulnerability by monitoring your online activity, in order to garner information so that marketer are able to extract as much information about you by mining your data, or as Zuboff refers to as behavioural surplus, whenever you view, search or use one of your internet devices or app.

These mobile devices send out ongoing information about their users which are then kept in storage in the cloud. Through artificial intelligence marketers can then predict specific ads targeting your specific desires or emotional state at any given online moment. In doing so sellers increase their chance of making a sale because they know what sort of a person you are, what emotions you may be undergoing and specify a product or service tailored to your specific desires or emotional regulatory needs, based on information about you obtained through your previous usage, but without your knowledge of being monitored nor your consent to do so.

Based on your likes and dislikes and what regulated your emotions, (what makes you feel good or better) derived through ongoing corporate monitoring and storage of your emotional states when online, and using artificial intelligence, marketers target your emotional needs and desires by suggesting a purchase of a product or service, relying on your emotional regulatory needs.

These purchases are often impulsive.

Whereas initially addictive products were *substances* that were consumed, new *behaviour* addictions were added to the cornucopia of internet and smartphone addiction among others. These other addiction are: shopping; gaming, vaping, gambling; pornography and numerous social network sights, such as *Facebook*, *Tweeter* and other eclectic sites. In other words there has been an increase in the prevalence and the diverse types of addictions. Because addiction entails ongoing consumption of products or services, capitalism continues to intentionally develop addictive products and services with only one reason in mind, which is the underlying motive of capitalism in the first place, the limitless consumption and hence limitless profit.

Unless we come to terms with capitalism, as a social institution whose primary aim is to maximize profit, which entails the continued consumption of products and services that are increasingly *designed* to be addictive, we fail to realize the current social nature of today's surveillance capitalism and its harmful implications.

As an institution whose current fundamental tenant is to maximize profit, it increasingly and deliberately fabricates addictions. Capitalism, when taken to its logical end, entails the production of addictive behaviour through its maintenance of profit maximization, which entail products and services that are used maximally, much like addicts do with their substance addiction. But there is a difference.

The dissimilarity is that when it comes to substance addiction we could easily identify such addictions by their obvious consequences. A drunkard is obviously intoxicated. But when it comes to today's behaviour addiction, it's not as obvious that someone whose primary preoccupation is to play video games, such that he cannot work regularly, his studies are determinately affected, he buys games online impulsively and is socially underdeveloped because of poor social skills due to lack of interaction with face to face people is an addiction. But is just that, not simply fun.

Unless we first come to terms with the notion that the very bases of contemporary capitalism, when taken to its extreme, increases types of

addictions and the harmful consequences to both those of today and those of the future due to excessive consumption.

If the present state of capitalism's pernicious effects remains misunderstood and therefore improperly unregulated, as is the case today, its destructive effects will attract more vulnerable young people to become the new addicts of the internet age and all the negative consequences to them, their family and our future social well-being, including the consequence that our children are addicted to their smartphones which crowds them out of interacting with us.

Our children have been lost to some screen media and as anyone who works with addictions already knows, once a person has an addiction, it is difficult, but not impossible to give it up altogether or learn to better control its usage.

Prevention of addictions can occur by monitoring what our children are doing online and setting limits on the amount of time they spend is one approach to minimizing screen media addiction. But we first have to come to terms with what David Courtwright aptly entitled his recent book *The Age of Addiction*. That is where we are and increasingly headed towards, unless we come to terms with the need for regulations which ought to be put in place to reduce the prevalence of intentionally manufactured addictions.